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ABSTRACT

Discrepancies between the pessimistic national evaluations and the more encouraging state and local evaluations of compensatory education programs are explored in this paper. A conventional explanation for the discrepancies, namely, that the averaging of test scores from a large national sample "cancels out" the results of successful programs, is challenged. It is held, rather, that the quality of the evaluations themselves, as well as vested political interests may be responsible for the findings. Well publicized "exemplary" programs are revealed to have enjoyed only short term success. It is also suggested that a decline of initial achievement gains may occur while children are enrolled in enrichment programs. (Author/GC)

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COMPENSATORY EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL VERSUS STATE AND LOCAL EVALUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the discrepancies between the pessimistic national evaluations and the more encouraging state and local evaluations of compensatory education programs. The author challenges one of the conventional explanations for this phenomenon and points out that the quality of the evaluations and vested political interests may be largely responsible for the differences in the findings. The writer also reveals that many well-publicized "exemplary" local programs with hard data have enjoyed only short-term success and suggests that a "fading out" of initial achievement gains may occur while children are enrolled in enrichment programs.

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COMPENSATORY EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS
OF NATIONAL VERSUS STATE AND LOCAL EVALUATIONS

In the last few years a number of observers have noted that the Title I ESEA evaluations conducted by states and localities have generally found compensatory education to be more effective than have the various national evaluations. In 1972 the American Institute for Research (AIR) mentioned the phenomenon in a summary of a national evaluation the Institute had written on Title I.

> There is little evidence at the national level that the program has had any positive impact on eligible and participating children. Data from state and local levels do, however, provide evidence that some Title I projects have had a significant positive impact on participating children.[1]

In 1973 the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children wrote:

> Compensatory education programs are locally designed and it is impossible for national evaluations to have impact on local programs. Compensatory education programs are state approved with federal regulations. When the local evaluation is compared with a national evaluation, more successful programs are evident.[2]

Following a review of selected national studies of the effectiveness of schooling, Samuel Halperin, formerly Director of the Office of Legislation of USOE and now Director of the Institute of Educational Leadership in Washington, stated recently in a popular education journal that achievement gains of a month's learning for months of instruction "are now

being made by most districts in most states."[3]

Implicit in these observations is the notion that the findings of the large-scale national studies may be distorted by what may be called the "canceling effect." Since participants in compensatory education programs comprise a heterogeneous group exposed to an infinite variety of teachers employing many different methods, what "works" for some children may not be effective for others. In other words, the performance of pupils with appropriate instruction who are really benefiting from compensatory education is averaged with the achievement of other Title I participants for whom compensatory education has been a meaningless or even negative experience. Since the large-scale evaluations have been unable to control for the relevant demographic variables and effectively isolate particular kinds of instruction, the simple averaging of test scores from a national sample may "cancel out" the results of successful programs and techniques. The researcher may then conclude that compensatory education has had no effect on pupil achievement.

At the state and local level, however, the evaluator is likely to gain a more accurate assessment of the effectiveness of compensatory education because he is usually collecting data from specific Title I programs. Since the pupil population at these lower levels is more homogeneous and the curriculum and methodology less diverse, researchers can have greater control of the relevant input variables. If indeed some forms of compensatory education are working for a reasonable percentage of the disadvantaged school population, movement to smaller

studies conducted by the states, localities and individual programs should produce more encouraging results.

While a "canceling effect" may indeed occur less frequently in a smaller-scale study, it is probable that most of the alleged discrepancies between the pessimistic national evaluations and the optimistic state and local evaluations can be attributed largely to the difference in the quality of the evaluations. In this author's reading of the various national evaluations of schooling and a random sample of the Title I state and local evaluations published in ERIC it has become quite obvious that the national studies usually involve far more sophisticated research than the smaller surveys. Cross-sectional surveys such as the Coleman Report and the Ohio-Westinghouse evaluation of Head Start were based on random samples and the data were subjected to detailed analysis by persons with considerable expertise. Several additional evaluations by independent research organizations, which attempted to identify exemplary programs throughout the country (such as the American Institute for Research and the RMC Research Corporation), eliminated all programs from consideration which were unable to provide hard data. At the state level, however, conclusions suggesting substantial pupil achievement gains have been based usually on data which is questionable for any scientific interpretation. Commonly missing from the state evaluations are uniform achievement measures, pre- and post-test scores and control groups.

The State and Local Evaluations

Considering the initial political opposition to Title I, the nature of the American federal system and the inevitable administrative problems which accompany the implementation of an act so far-reaching as ESEA, it is understandable that state evaluations of the first year or two were often little more than descriptive propoganda. For example in 1966 Massachusetts[4] and Hawaii[5] report numerous optimistic subjective statements from program personnel throughout their respective states, and Maryland simply suggested that Title I ". . . provided experience which should result in improved levels of achievement and much improved general attitudes toward education."[6] Similarly California's 1966 report could only state that "objective tests" had revealed that most Title I pupils had achieved a month's growth for month of instruction.[7] Later reports, however, generally show little improvement, and it is difficult to escape the feeling that local personnel in their eager pursuit of federal money have often deliberately omitted negative data and have grossly distorted the impact of Title I on pupil achievement.

Typical of such apparent misrepresentation of research data are the 1970 evaluations of Missouri and Virginia. The Missouri report analyzed the results of various standardized reading tests given to some 24,000 Title I pupils throughout the state and concluded that the average gain was roughly .8 of a year. This figure is of little value for we are not told how many of the roughly 120,000 pupils enrolled in Title I participated in reading programs. But .8 can hardly be called

an achievement rate gain of any real educational significance since low income children typically progress at about .7. Missouri feels, however, that these gains represent a substantial improvement in pupil achievement.

> The impact of Title I upon the total educational achievement of eligible educationally deprived children in the state of Missouri has been great. . . The normal expected gain for the total population is one year gain in academic achievement per year of instruction. Title I students have gained about .8 of a year on the average. This number becomes really significant when we consider that the gain without Title I assistance might have been from .2 to .5 of a year of achievement. This consideration indicates real impetus toward the continuation and intensification of Title I.[8] (p. 11)

In the Virginia evaluation[9] one is encouraged by a significant gain in reading of some 8,000 children until it is learned from piecing together statistics from various charts that this figure apparently represents only a small percentage of the roughly 89,000 pupils in Title I reading programs throughout the state. Just how many pupils actually took standardized reading tests is anyone's guess, for the report only stated that 86.5% of the local educational agencies use the S.A.T. Another table showing a mean reading gain of 1.29 months for 3,894 children does not even offer the grades of the pupils much less warn the reader that these children constitute only a tiny fraction of Title I students. Nevertheless, near the beginning of the report Virginia summarized this sloppy evaluation in the most optimistic and misleading terms:

> The educationally deprived child enrolled in Title I instruction has improved his educational position relative to others in his grade. His rate of learning has been accelerated. This conclusion is reached as a result of extensive use of standardized tests and analyses of all data submitted to the state by local educational agencies. (p. 7)

If one suspects that the evaluations cited above are atypical, simply select and read at random a number of ESEA state evaluations published by the ERIC Clearinghouse from 1966-1974. Of the few evaluations from any such sample which could be classified as empirical, intellectually honest research, the overwhelming majority will have been either unable to collect adequate data on pupil achievement or will suggest that compensatory education has had little effect on the achievement gains of most Title I pupils.

Normally a state evaluation is little more than a summary of the many local and program evaluations which have been conducted throughout a particular state. The quality of these reports is usually extremely poor. In a study undertaken at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1974 of secondary and compensatory education programs the problems of the great majority of the reviewed Title I programs were summarized:

> The studies. . . suffer from weaknesses in their designs and measures. They have infrequently utilized pre-post-test scores and, if they have, the chance of control of comparison groups makes it difficult to determine whether gains resulted from the program, treatment, maturation, intervening variables or falsification of data.[10] (p. 37)

And in 1971 at Harvard, the Center for Educational Policy Research commented on the quality of the local reports after reviewing some 750 Title I evaluations.

> Evaluations are done to satisfy several different groups of people--seldom is the researcher on the top of the list. Evaluations are often political documents as well as objective analyses of programs, and must be read with that in mind.[11]

Under contract with the Office of Education, the American Institute for Research (AIR) conducted three studies which attempted to identify "successful programs" from which hard data suggested greater than month-for-month gains for the average program participant. In 1971 the third in the series of AIR reports states:

> This study confirmed the conclusions of the earlier two studies in this series, namely that very few compensatory education programs for the disadvantaged have clearly demonstrated success. Only 3.1 percent of the 326 candidate programs that provided educational information were found to meet the study's criteria for success. It should be pointed out that most of the programs rejected during this study were not rejected because they were demonstrated failures, but rather because their evaluation methodology was so inadequate that a conclusion about success or failure could not be drawn. Clearly, improvement must be made in program evaluations before the effectiveness of compensatory education can be fairly assessed.[12] (p. iv)

The Short-Term Effectiveness of Successful Programs

In reviewing the literature the reader is very often impressed by reports of various "innovative" programs producing dramatic gains. Unfortunately, later reports very often suggest that these projects are no longer effective. For example, of the 21 elementary and secondary school programs labeled "successful" (producing greater than month-for-month achievement gains) in the first two AIR reports, only

five were judged as remaining successful in a follow-up study by AIR in 1971.*

At this point it is unclear just why most of AIR's exemplary programs reported only short-term success. Collecting longitudinal data on pupil achievement in compensatory education programs at the elementary and secondary levels is an extremely arduous task for the researcher in this field. There is some evidence, however, that the "fade out" of cognitive gains so often reported following exposure to Head Start and associated pre-school programs may also occur while children are participating in compensatory education programs. Evaluations of two of New York City's earliest compensatory education programs (Higher Horizons[13] and More Effective Schools[14]) have reported that elementary school age pupils initially gained and then regressed during participation in the programs. Similarly, Martin Deutsch's Initial Enrichment Program,[15] a five-year compensatory education project from pre-kindergarten through third grade, reported that the children's early gains tended to fade before they left the program. If further research identifies a similar phenomenon occurring in several other projects, it will give additional support to the possibility that the fade out of achievement gains is responsible in part for the short-term success of so many "enrichment" programs.

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*After School Study Centers, New York, N.Y.; Programmed Tutorial Reading Project, Indianapolis, Indiana; Summer Jr. High Schools, New York, N.Y.; Project R-3, San Jose, Calif.; College Bound Program, New York, N.Y.

A Canceling Effect at the Lower Levels?

While it is probable that evaluative methodological differences and political interests are largely responsible for the alleged discrepancies between national and more localized studies, it is conceivable that a canceling effect may distort some of the data on pupil achievement gathered by the smaller political entities. It must be remembered that even specific program evaluations often report the achievement growth rate of thousands of pupils with much of the demographic and curricular complexities that accompany a national survey. Despite the poor quality of most state and local Title I evaluations, one is likely to get the impression from reading many of these studies that a small but significant percentage of pupils (perhaps as high as 25 per cent) have been equaling or exceeding the achievement growth rate of their more advantaged counterparts. However, even at the program level it is difficult to determine who these children are, how long they maintain these gains and whether they would have achieved this growth rate in a "regular" school. From this writer's reading of the literature it is suggested that within the Title I pupil population it is the most and least economically impoverished children who generally make the greatest achievement gains with the former improving for only a short time and the latter for a sustained period. It is possible, however, that many Title I pupils are benefitting from compensatory education who represent the "mainstream" of the disadvantaged pupil population and that for some

reason variables characteristic of so many enrichment programs such as individualized instruction and "whole child" affective growth are having an educationally significant impact promoting achievement gains of 1.0 or above. On the other hand, the same technique may be having little or no influence on another segment of this "typical" population (achieving at about .70 the usual rate for poverty-stricken children) and many may even have a negative impact (lowering the achievement rate to .3 or .4) on still another portion of this "typical" population. Therefore, instruction beneficial for some, meaningless for most and detrimental for others may reveal that the average Title I child is still achieving at roughly 2/3 the rate of his economically advantaged peer. Certainly more research is needed in these areas before one can conclude that compensatory education has been and will likely continue to be a failure.

At the moment it must be reiterated that one must be very cautious in citing the more optimistic reports from the states and localities as evidence that compensatory education is reducing the inequality in cognitive achievement which exists among the various socioeconomic groups in American society. Over the past few years critics such as Coleman, Stephens, Moynihan and Jencks have seriously questioned the traditional belief that variation in schooling has substantial influence on variation in pupil learning. And like it or not, educators must candidly admit that there is little empirical evidence at any level to suggest that the roughly 17 billion dollars spent on ESEA

compensatory education programs has had a statistically significant effect on improving the achievement of low income children relative to their disadvantaged counterparts in "regular" school programs. Moreover, there is even less evidence that Title I programs have been able to produce gains of educational significance, i.e., to bring disadvantaged children from the normal achievement gain rate of .67 to 1.0 or above. Other critics in the hereditarian camp have scolded many educators for their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the failure of compensatory education based on their dogmatic acceptance of the "environmental mystique." But it is an "educational mystique," not the environmental, to which so many people associated with schools may have fallen victim. The true environmentalist could not have much faith in the ability of marginal institutions such as the schools to compensate for achievement differences which are largely caused by differences in the experiences of children outside the classroom. Indeed, if the inequality in school achievement between the rich and the poor is largely caused by environmental inequalities, it is only logical that a closing of this achievement gap will probably only occur by equalizing the environment.

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